WOMEN AND LITERATURE:
Lady Macbeth and the Social Role of Women

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Abstract

The character of Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth* has remained an abiding source of mystery for readers and critics who have endeavoured to understand her from various perspectives. The most intriguing aspect of her character is the sudden change in her behaviour from a strong-willed determined woman to a woman suffering from guilt and pangs of conscience which eventually lead her to the untimely tragic death. Various critics have tried to explain this phenomenon in different ways. The present paper intends to contest the views of Marilyn French and Terry Eagleton that the downfall of Lady Macbeth should be attributed to her violation of the social role of women.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Lady Macbeth, feminism, social role of women

Introduction:

Macbeth is one of the four great tragedies written by Shakespeare. Among all the characters in the play, the most fascinating and the most discussed character is none other than Lady Macbeth. In the beginning of the play, Shakespeare puts in her lips certain powerful words which present her as a very determined and strong character. On the other hand, towards the end of the play, Lady Macbeth suddenly appears as a remorseful and repenting woman who is presented as undergoing a kind of mental punishment for her supposed misdeeds. It is true that Lady Macbeth contributed a lot to the aggrandizement of her husband's subdued ambition. Therefore, she is presented as a woman who not only incited her husband to commit a heinous crime like regicide but also she herself was complicit in

that crime. Therefore, critics like Marilyn French or Terry Eagleton hold Lady Macbeth guilty of violating her social role as a woman. The cause of her downfall and tragic death is attributed to her violation of this social role. This view throws a lot of questions like what should be the ideal role of woman in a society and how and by whom this social role of women should be decided. Besides, is there any definite and fixed role for women in society? Did Shakespeare accept the social roles of women as determined by the patriarchy of his contemporary society? The present paper intends to examine this view and other relevant questions in regard to the character of Lady Macbeth.

Discussion:

What needs to be recognized in the first place is that: while the biological role of women has been defined by Nature for good, the social role of women is a shifting concept which is defined by society from time to time. Since society itself is not a fixed entity but a constantly evolving process, therefore, the social role of women has always remained a fluid and flexible subject. What should be the actual role of a woman in a particular society is a matter to be decided by that society of which she is a part. The plays of William Shakespeare abound with a number of female characters who have been subjected to rigorous investigations from the broader perspectives of society and women. The recent developments in the field of feminist literary criticism have analysed the female characters of Shakespeare and have made illuminating revelations and thought provoking interpretations. Keeping this perspective in mind, an humble attempt has been made here to critically examine the well-thought views advanced by different eminent critics, and it seeks to find out to what extent Shakespeare has defined the social role of women through his female characters if at all he has done so.

The social role of women becomes a pertinent issue in case of Lady Macbeth as it appears that she goes beyond the role defined to her by the society. Though she is a female and is expected to play only a second fiddle to her husband, sometimes she asserts herself with more confidence, determination and boldness than her vacillating husband. As soon as she receives the letter from her husband apprising her of the prophecies made by the witches, a very confident pronouncement comes from her mouth:

"Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be

What thou art promised". (*Macbeth*, I.v. 14-15)

She leaves no stone unturned to remove all the scruples from the mind of her ambitious but tender-minded husband. She is even ready to sacrifice her womanliness for the sake of her murderous intention, without reflecting on the decisive part which this womanliness must play when the question afterwards arises of preserving the aim of her ambition, which has been attained through a crime. When she utters,

"Come you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here ....

Come to my woman's breast

And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, (*Macbeth*, I.v. 39-47)

She gives a strong indication that her womanliness is preventing her from committing a crime which is supposed to be committed only by a man. But another utterance of her gives a different view:

".......Had he not resembled

My father as he slept. I had done it..."(Macbeth, II. ii, 14-15)

From the above observations, one thing becomes clear that in the first half of the play Lady Macbeth is a more daring, resolute and ambitious character even than her husband. Even after the murder of Duncan she retains this nature to a certain stage. For example, in the banqueting scene she alone keeps her head, cloaks her husband's mental state of confusion and hurriedly finds a pretext to dismiss the guests. Her ingenuity of mind remains intact for a long time even after the murder. But it is in the sleep-walking scene that an altogether different Lady Macbeth appears before the audience. One can hardly find out any other character of Shakespeare who is so transformed within such a brief action period of the play. It seems that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth transform themselves in the course of the drama and swap each other's virtues and deficiencies. And here lies the most unsolved aspect of the character of Lady Macbeth. What causes the sea-change in her nature? The celebrated psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud offers a psychological interpretation to this unusual phenomenon. In the words of Freud,

" I believe Lady Macbeth's illness, the transformation of her callousness into penitence, could be explained directly as a reaction to her childlessness, by which she is convinced of her impotence against the decrees of nature, and at the same time reminded that it is through her own fault if her crime has been robbed of the better part of its fruits."(Freud, pp 42)

In the same article Freud refers to Ludwig Jekels whose view regarding Lady Macbeth is entirely different:

"He believes that Shakespeare often splits a character up into two personages, which, taken separately, are not completely understandable and do not become so until they are brought together once more into a unity. This might be so with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In that case it would of course be pointless to regard her as an independent character and seek to discover the motives of her change, without considering the Macbeth who completes her." (Freud, pp 44)

However, critics like Marilyn French hold a different view. The sea-change in the nature of Lady Macbeth which is seen in the sleep-walking scene and her consequent death are generally attributed to her failure in maintaining the social role assigned to her. According to Marilyn French, Lady Macbeth falls as "her crime is heinous because it violates her social role, which has been created into a principle of experience: she fails to uphold the feminine principle."(French, pp 17) An analysis of this observation reveals that Lady Macbeth should have played the ideal and patriarchy defined role of a woman who is

soft, kind and humane and that is the role assigned to her by the society. But she flouts this social norm through her utterances and actions. She incites her husband to commit a crime to the tune of regicide and she shields her husband from all possible retributions for a long time. This is a clear violation of her social role and therefore she meets such a tragic death in the play. As a female character, according to Marilyn French, she falls in the category of Regan and Goneril, who also as daughters of King Lear, violate their social roles. If the view that Shakespeare has shown himself as an upholder of the existing moral, political and natural system is acceptable then the interpretation that Lady Macbeth's fall is due to her failure in maintaining her social role seems to be tenable. Lady Macbeth has gone against the natural system, the womanliness of her character, for which she must face the consequence otherwise the whole system might collapse. In this connection, one is reminded of what is said about Regan and Goneril in *King Lear* :

"If she live long

And in the end meet the old course of death

Women will all turn monsters." (*King Lear*, Act 3 Scene vii)

Goneril's and Regan's treatment of their father not merely reverses the existing patterns of rule and is seen not simply as cruel and selfish but as a fundamental violation of specific social role assigned to them.

The noted Marxist critic Terry Eagleton also holds a similar view when he says that Lady Macbeth herself crosses the strict divide of gender roles and cries out to be unsexed, flouting Angelo's paternalistic advice to Isabella in "*Measure for Measure*":

"Be that you are

That is, a woman: if you be more, you're none (II. iv. 134-135)

Therefore, Lady Macbeth has not only flouted her social role but also gone beyond the natural and biological units of a woman. Though this interpretation looks credible and convincing yet it leaves room for further thinking. If the fall of Lady Macbeth is caused by her failure in meeting her social role, then the tragic death of Ophelia must be explained out in similar terms. If the "cruelty" or unwomanliness is at the root of the fall of Lady Macbeth, then why does Ophelia meet a similar fate in 'Hamlet' without any of the faults committed by either Lady Macbeth or Regan and Goneril? Similarly, how the tragic death of Desdemona is to be explained? What social role of woman was violated by Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*? Because, if Shakespeare is believed to be the upholder of certain social and moral principles, then the presence of such principles is likely to be felt in all of his plays and characters.

Therefore, this paper proposes to present the view that it would be incorrect to arrive at a safe conclusion that Shakespeare had defined some specific social roles for women through his female characters. Both male and female characters of Shakespeare bring to the fore the complexity and

insoluble enigma of human characters and their relationships. In this regard, the view of Hiren Gohain, an eminent critic and scholar from Assam may be considered. According to Professor Gohain, instead of offering any specific social principles, Shakespeare, in his plays, had actually raised questions on all the traditional social systems and accepted moral values and through his characters he brings out the conflicts and contradictions associated with those well-established social values and norms (Gohain, pp 88). Therefore, the character of Lady Mecbeth is also an attempt by Shakespeare towards his understanding of the question of the women in relation to society and family. Needless to say, Shakespeare does not provide any readymade and straight forward solution to these conflicts and, it may be safely concluded that the greatness of his plays lies in the irresolution of those contradictions.

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